

WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1. A user support apparatus comprising:

an utterance identification block which has an electronic collection of anticipated user utterances, and identifies a content of an inputted user utterance;

a response block which has an electronic collection of action patterns for an agent for responding to the user utterances, and enables the agent to respond to the inputted user utterances;

a search unit which searches information requested by the user among information offered by a plurality of information providers; and

a process unit which executes a process for prioritizing the information providers,

wherein the utterance identification block further includes an additional collection of anticipated utterances that trigger the prioritizing process, and the process unit initiates the prioritizing process when the inputted user utterance is included in the additional utterance collection.

2. The apparatus of claim 1, wherein the additional utterance collection is incorporated into the user utterance collection.

3. The apparatus of claim 1, wherein the process unit arranges information related to a specific information provider at the top of a list of search results obtained by the search unit.

4. The apparatus of claim 1, wherein the process unit emphasizes information related to a specific information provider when a search result obtained by the information search unit is presented to the user.

5. The apparatus of claim 1, wherein the process unit displays a search result obtained by the information search unit with an advertisement of a specific information provider attached.

6. The apparatus of claim 1, wherein the process unit monitors an updating status of information related to a specific information provider and notifies the user of the updating status when the information has been updated.

7. The apparatus of claim 1, further comprising a charging unit which charges an information provider granted a high priority by the process unit.

8. The apparatus of claim 1, further comprising a setting unit which enables the user to register a specific

information provider to be granted a high priority, and wherein the process unit executes the prioritizing process for the registered specific information provider.

9. The apparatus of claim 1, further comprising an awarding unit which awards the user a merit when the user registers a specific information provider to be granted a high priority.

10. The apparatus of claim 1, further comprising a library providing unit which offers the user utterance library to a third party off line or on line.

11. The apparatus of claim 1, further comprising a recording unit which obtains a record of the user's access to the system, wherein the response block chooses one from a plurality of choices of the action patterns of the agent to respond to the user utterance depending on the user's access record.

12. A user support system comprising a plurality of said user support apparatuses of claim 1 connected to a network as independent network nodes, each of the apparatuses corresponding to one specialized field, wherein the user utterance collection, the agent action collection, and the additional utterance collection of each of the apparatuses

are generated according to each specialized field.

13. The system of claim 12, wherein the plural user support apparatuses include the respective response blocks therein and share the utterance identification block at any one of the network nodes.

14. The system of claim 12, wherein the utterance identification block of the user support apparatus further includes an index storage that stores an index of contents of the user utterance collection, and the information search unit initially searches the inputted user utterance in the index storage.

15. The system of claim 12, wherein the user support apparatus further comprises a library providing unit which offers the user utterance library to a third party off line or on line.

16. The system of claim 12, wherein the user support apparatus further comprises a recording unit which obtains a record of the user's access to the system, wherein the response block chooses one from a plurality of choices of the action patterns of the agent to respond to the user utterance depending on the user's access record.

17. The system of claim 12, wherein the process unit of the user support apparatus arranges information related to a specific information provider at the top of a list of search results obtained by the search unit.

18. The system of claim 12, wherein the process unit of the user support apparatus emphasizes information related to a specific information provider when a search result obtained by the information search unit is presented to the user.

19. The apparatus of claim 12, wherein the process unit of the user support apparatus displays a search result obtained by the information search unit with an advertisement of a specific information provider attached.